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The ‘contact hypothesis’: Critical reflections and future directions

Research on intergroup contact has grown exponentially over the past decade. Such research has typically extolled the benefits of positive interaction between members of historically divided communities, particularly on outcomes related to prejudice reduction. Emerging work in the field, however, has qualified this optimistic picture by identifying three gaps in the existing literature. First, in everyday life, contact may be construed as a negative experience that increases rather than decreases responses such as prejudice, anxiety, and avoidance. Second, in real life settings, contact is often circumscribed by informal practices of (re)segregation that are easily overlooked if researchers rely primarily on examining structured contact and explicit processes using primarily laboratory and questionnaire methods. Third, positive contact may have ‘ironic’ effects on the political attitudes and behaviours of the historically disadvantaged, undermining their recognition of social injustice and decreasing their willingness to engage in collective action to challenge the status quo. Although it is now a truism that intergroup contact can reduce intergroup prejudice, these developments emphasize the importance of maintaining a critical perspective on the ‘contact hypothesis’ as a model for promoting social change in historically divided and unequal societies. They also lay the foundations for future developments in the field.

Keywords: contact, prejudice, behaviour, social change

The ‘contact hypothesis’: Critical reflections and future directions

Hailed as one of the most successful ideas in social psychology (Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami, 2003), the ‘contact hypothesis’ posits that positive interaction between members of different groups tends to reduce intergroup prejudice. Over the past decade, research supporting this hypothesis has grown exponentially. In part, this renaissance of the field can be traced to Pettigrew and Tropp’s (2006) influential meta-analytic review, which suggested that the vast majority of previous studies (around 94%) have evidenced a negative relationship between contact and prejudice. It also suggested that this finding may hold even when contact does not occur under the ideal conditions that Allport (1954) recommended as vital to its success (e.g. equality of status between participants). In light of this evidence, the contact hypothesis is now widely accepted as one of the important psychological interventions to promote social change. Secure in the knowledge that contact ‘works’, many researchers have settled into the project of refining our explanations of how, why and when it works. In addition, they have increasingly explored how prejudice can be reduced in the absence of direct forms of contact. For example, imagined contact interventions (in which individuals imagine engaging in intergroup interactions) amongst school children (Stathi, Cameron, Hartley & Bradford, 2014) and extended contact through storytelling (Husnu, Mertan & Cicek, 2016) have been found to be successful in reducing intergroup prejudice.

This positive framing of the contact literature departs from the more cautious assessments offered in previous decades. Amir (1969), Stephan (1978), Reicher (1986), Forbes (1997), and Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux (2005), for example, all accepted that contact can have beneficial effects on intergroup attitudes, particularly under favourable conditions. However, they also emphasized some fundamental limitations, gaps and inconsistencies within the contact tradition: the gulf between the idealized interactions studied by psychologists and

actual interactions between groups in real life settings; the inconsistency of contact effects across different contexts and levels of analysis; the lack of generalizability of such effects; and, perhaps most important, the potential limitations of the model of social change underlying the contact hypothesis, which mainly pins its hopes on the psychological rehabilitation of dominant group bigots.

In this paper, we recover and expand upon this more ‘critical’ perspective by discussing three developments in the contact literature; focusing on emerging research on negative contact experiences, informal practices of segregation, and the paradoxical effects of contact on the political attitudes of disadvantaged groups. In so doing, we do not dispute that ‘contact’ can form the basis for successful interventions to decrease prejudice, rather we argue for the necessity of maintaining a critical perspective on the contact hypothesis. We conclude by anticipating some future research directions in the field.

Emerging critiques of the contact hypothesis

When contact ‘fails’: Negative contact experiences and their consequences

Contact researchers have long been aware that negative contact experiences - although they may be less frequent than positive contact experiences (Barlow et al. 2012; Graf, Paolini & Rubin, 2014) - have the potential to exacerbate rather than improve intergroup relations. As early as 1954, Allport warned that the ‘wrong’ kinds of contact could “...strengthen the adverse mental associations that we have” (p.264), prompting an increase in negative emotions and stereotypes.

Until fairly recently, however, empirical work on contact has overwhelmingly prioritized positive and structured forms of intergroup encounters and interactions, arguably leading to a somewhat idealistic vision of the realities of contact in ordinary situations (cf. Dixon et al.,

2005). Although the contact research presented in Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis included a range of groups and contexts, in the vast majority of experimental work 'contact' has consisted of relatively benign, short terms exchanges unfolding between undergraduate students in situations that are largely stripped of less palatable hallmarks of intergroup relations in historically divided societies: fear, contempt, suspicion, anger, and disgust; the routine exploitation, humiliation, objectification and dehumanization of others; the abuses of power and privilege that inevitably infect day-to-day exchanges in hierarchical social systems; the deep resentments felt by those who are targeted for such abuses; and the apprehensions of those in advantaged positions about potential future loss of power, material wealth and status.

As these examples illustrate, the concept of 'negative' contact does not merely denote the *absence* of positive qualities such as intimacy, cooperation and equality. It also denotes modes of interacting with others that are associated with specific kinds of adverse experiences. Nor is it valid to presuppose that positive and negative contact are merely opposing poles of a simple, unidimensional continuum: a conception that precludes, for example, the possibility that individuals may experience high levels of *both* kinds of contact and that such experiences may be qualitatively distinct and associated with varying consequences over time. Supporting this idea, some studies have found that ratings of positive and negative contact are only moderately correlated (cf. Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Moreover, as detailed below, emerging evidence suggests not only that negative contact has independent effects on intergroup attitudes, but also that the two forms of contact may interact to shape such attitudes in complex ways that are not yet fully understood.

In a study comparing contact experiences across several European societies, for instance, Graf et al. (2014) found that positive contact experiences were more commonly reported than negative contact experiences; however, negative contact had a stronger overall relationship

with prejudice. Barlow et al. (2012) similarly reported that the prejudice-increasing effects of negative contact outweighed the prejudice-reducing effects of positive contact: a finding they dubbed the ‘contact caveat’. Aberson (2015) found that positive and negative contact predicted affective reactions to a similar degree, but that negative contact was a stronger predictor of stereotypes than positive contact. He also found that threat was a stronger mediator of the effects negative contact experiences on the outcome measures than of the effects of positive contact. Similarly, Techakesari et al. (2015) examined the effects of differing contact experiences, in the US, China and Thailand, on intergroup attitudes and found that positive contact was a less consistent predictor of intergroup attitudes than negative contact and that when negative contact was included in their model, the effects of positive contact weakened.

Offering a potential explanation for the seemingly stronger impact of negative contact on intergroup attitudes, Paolini, Harwood and Rubin (2010) point out that such contact is particularly likely to heighten category salience, thereby leading participants to view others as exemplars of groups rather than unique individuals. In such circumstances, as both Wilder (1984) and Hewstone and Brown (1986) emphasized some 30 years ago, contact effects (e.g. attitude and stereotype changes) are more likely to *generalize* the outgroup as a whole. The recent wave of work on contact research suggests that this effect, ironically, may be stronger for negative than for positive contact experiences. That is, negative experiences of contact with individuals may be particularly likely to worsen our attitudes towards the groups to which they belong.

By the same token, work on the positive-negative contact asymmetry remains in its infancy. Some recent studies have suggested that we need to move beyond a simplistic approach that evaluates which forms of contact have strongest effects in order to explore more complex, interactive patterns. These studies have qualified the idea that negative

contact simply overwhelms the influence of positive contact experiences. For example, Paolini et al. (2014) have shown that past experiences of positive contact may weaken the association between negative contact and social category salience and thus, by implication, its associated effects on intergroup prejudice and discrimination.

In an interesting reversal of this temporal sequence, Birtel and Crisp (2012) found that imagining a negative encounter with an outgroup member prior to imagining a positive intergroup encounter was more effective in reducing prejudice than imagining positive interactions alone. This finding led the authors to speculate that “a small dose of negativity administered just prior to a positively focused intervention can be surprisingly effective in reducing prejudice toward stigmatized groups.” (p.1381)

As we discuss further in our conclusion, such studies reveal an important gap in the literature. We don't yet fully understand the nature of the relationship between different kinds of contact experiences, or appreciate what, over time, what their cumulative and interactive effect on intergroup relations might be.

‘Leading a horse to water’? Informal practices of (re)segregation in ‘desegregated’ environments

Most psychological research on contact published over the past decade – amounting to many hundreds of studies - has relied on one of two methodological approaches, usually focusing on structured contact and explicit, self-reported, contact experiences. The first approach has employed experimental methods in which participants engage in some kind of laboratory analogue of a real world interaction in order to explore the effects of contact on intergroup attitudes. A highly efficient and increasingly popular example of this approach is

work on so-called ‘imagined’ contact, as illustrated by the Birtel and Crisp (2012) study cited above. In this research paradigm, participants are invited to envisage an encounter with a member of another group, usually having been primed with the idea that this encounter is positive and relaxed, which is compared to a control condition (Crisp & Turner, 2009). The second and more common approach has employed questionnaire methods in order to investigate the relationship between self-reported contact experiences and self-reported prejudice, as well as exploring the varying potential mediators and moderators of this relationship. Research in this area has generally converged around the idea that contact improves intergroup relations by decreasing intergroup threats, increasing intergroup empathy and improving our knowledge of one another (e.g. Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

We are not criticizing per se the use of survey or experimental methods. Both have undoubtedly contributed significantly to the contact tradition. In fact, they have formed bedrock of most of what we know. However, some of its limitations are exposed by work that examines how the very opportunity for ‘contact’ is limited by structural and behavioural processes of segregation that are not easily captured by evidence gathered in the safe space of the laboratory or through the distribution of self-report questionnaires (c.f. Dixon et al. 2005). To date, such processes have generally not been a key focus of contact researchers.

On a macro-structural level, a range of evidence shows how institutional segregation has proven to be resilient to transformation in many historically divided societies, including the societies in which contact research has flourished. Given the centrality of the *Brown vs the Board of Education*¹ case within the history of research on contact and desegregation, the persistence of educational segregation in the USA is a poignant example,. There can be no doubt - as the social scientists and psychologists who supported the landmark case that

¹ The *Brown vs Board of Education* case was heard by the Supreme Court in May 1954, which declared that racial segregation of schools in the US was unconstitutional.

brought an end to de jure segregation in the US passionately averred (Clark, Chein & Cook, 1952/2004) - that segregation leads to blockages in intergroup communication that "... tend to increase mutual suspicion, distrust, and hostility" (p.497). Unfortunately, there can also be no doubt that the initial promise of educational desegregation in the United States has given way to a far more mixed and pessimistic picture. Many African Americans and members of other minority groups remain 'stuck in place' (Sharkey, 2009), being barred from access to the benefits that racially integrated education might bring (e.g., see Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides & Greenberg, 2012, for a discussion of this).

The tenacity of segregation is further illustrated by behavioural research on contact within so-called 'everyday life' or 'activity' spaces on which we focus for the rest of this section. A growing psychological literature on the 'micro-ecology of segregation' has used observational methods to map basic patterns of contact and segregation across a variety of settings (see Dixon et al., 2008), producing evidence that extends a small but suggestive earlier literature.

In one of the earliest studies, Campbell, Kruskal and Wallace (1966) mapped the racial and gender seating patterns of U.S. college students. They found that they remained racially segregated in their seating choices throughout the school year, despite inhabiting a mixed race environment where opportunities for contact were available. Later work conducted in other settings across the U.S. confirmed a similar pattern of racial segregation at a micro-ecological scale in a variety of everyday settings (e.g. Davis, Seibert & Breed, 1966; Haber, 1982; Parker, 1968; Schofield & Sagar, 1977).

The past decade or so has seen a revival of observational research on contact and segregation 'on the ground'. Dixon and Durrheim (2003) showed how the spatial arrangements produced by 'White', 'Black' and 'Indian' holiday-makers maintained varying patterns of racial separation on post-apartheid beach. Building on this study, and using

innovative methods such as time lapse photography, researchers mapped race relations in a variety of other South African settings, including nightclubs (Tredoux & Dixon, 2009) university lecture theatres and classrooms (Alexander & Tredoux, 2010; Koen & Durrheim, 2010), public steps (Tredoux et al., 2005), and university dining halls (Schrieffer et al., 2005; Schrieffer et al., 2010).

Extending this South African research, researchers have sought to map the ecology of contact and segregation in everyday settings in England (Clack, Dixon & Tredoux, 2005; Al Ramiah, Schmid, Hewstone & Floe, 2015), Australia (Priest et al., 2014), the USA (McCauley et al., 2001; Swynedouw, 2013) and Northern Ireland (Orr, McKeown, Cairns & Stringer, 2011; McKeown, Cairns, Stringer & Rae, 2012). The Northern Irish work is particularly interesting in that it has adapted the micro-ecological methods to examine situations where group differences are not indicated by physiognomic markers and has attempted to explore the social psychological factors that may underpin everyday practices of segregation. Using pre-drawn maps of a lecture theatre seating plan along with a correspondingly numbered questionnaires and envelopes, Orr et al. (2011) explored behavioural segregation between Catholics and Protestants during a University semester. Using the maps and numbered questionnaires, they were able to detect the self-reported religious identity of the person sitting in each seat (See Figure 1). They found that seating arrangements reproduced persistent levels of sectarian segregation over time. Similarly, McKeown, Stringer and Cairns (2016) used this method to study classroom seating choice in integrated schools in Northern Ireland and also found that religious segregation was evident in the majority of classrooms, despite these being settings in which the conditions for successful intergroup contact might be expected to exist.

seating behaviour - Schrieffer et al. (2010) reported that almost 60% of participants claimed that they habitually sat beside same race peers and often beside someone they already knew. At the same time, such habits can be broken. In their analysis of classroom seating plans, Van den Berg and Cillessen (2015) found that seating proximity to ingroup students was associated with more negative attitudes towards outgroup students (c.f. Campbell et al., 1966). Encouragingly, however, they also found that if they experimentally manipulated seating choice, attitudes towards others improved. Similarly, McKeown et al. (2012) found that a contact intervention to reduce seating segregation between Catholic and Protestant school children improved sectarian attitudes over time. At time 1 segregation and negative attitudes were evident, but by time 2 they had been significantly improved.

Overall, these studies confirm the necessity of complementing the field's heavy reliance on survey and laboratory methods and focus on structured contact with observation and ethnographic work on contact in 'on the ground'. They show that in supposedly desegregated spaces, members of different groups often segregate themselves from one another. Taylor, Dube and Belrose (1986) refer to this as the problem of "illusory" contact, and it has been documented even in contexts that are expressly designed to facilitate genuine interaction (c.f. Maoz, 2011). Replicated in an ever widening array of social contexts, this basic finding also suggests that the most fundamental condition of the contact hypothesis may not be fulfilled in many everyday contexts. As Pettigrew and Tropp (2013) wryly observe, 'you can lead a horse to water', but . . .

Ironic effects of contact on the political attitudes of the disadvantaged

Everything we have said so far in this paper is premised on the assumption that positive contact between groups improves intergroup relations. The term 'improve', however, bears closer scrutiny. Does it mean getting members of different groups to like one another more,

that is, to hold more positive thoughts and feelings about others? Or does it mean creating the social and psychological conditions under which systems of social inequality and discrimination are transformed? Until recently, many contact researchers have assumed that these two ideals – creating social harmony and creating social equality – are simply compatible and that both are nurtured by interventions to promote prejudice reduction, of which the contact hypothesis is arguably the most important.

Wright and colleagues have developed this theme by flagging the tensions between two models of social change in psychology: a *prejudice reduction model* based primarily on getting members of historically disadvantaged groups to develop more positive attitudes toward others and a *collective action* model based primarily on mobilizing the disadvantaged to challenge the status quo (Wright & Lubensky, 2009; Wright & Baray, 2012²). Historically, these two models of change have been regarded by psychologists as underpinning parallel, but broadly complementary, interventions to transform intergroup discrimination and inequality. However, Wright and colleagues argue that they may sometimes set in motion social psychological processes that work in opposing directions. The prejudice reduction model encourages dominant group bigots to like others more, based on the assumption that this process gradually reduces wider patterns of discrimination (Dixon, Levine, Reicher & Durrheim, 2012). It informs interventions that typically seek to diminish the salience of group boundaries, differences and identities, thus creating social harmony. By contrast, the collective action model encourages subordinate group members to acknowledge intergroup inequalities, experience a sense of injustice, and become angry enough to participate in collective action. This process tends to decrease rather than increase intergroup harmony by

² Proponents also recognise that the advantaged may also be collectively challenge inequality under certain conditions, (e.g. Mallett, Huntsinger, Sinclair, & Swim, 2008).

creating the conditions under which dominant group privilege is challenged by subordinate group activism.

The underlying tensions between these two models change have led some researchers to argue that prejudice reduction interventions may exert a ‘sedative effect’ (Cakal, Hewstone, Schwar & Heath, 2011) on the collective resistance of historically disadvantaged groups to social inequality, even to the point of encouraging them to acquiesce in their own exploitation. This claim has been evidenced particularly powerfully by recent studies of intergroup contact.

Cross-sectional surveys conducted in South Africa, for example, have suggested that contact between Whites and Blacks tends to improve the racial attitudes of both groups; however, it also diminishes Black South Africans’ readiness to recognise the persistence of racial discrimination in the post-apartheid era (Dixon et al., 2010) and support for political policies designed to tackle the society’s legacy of racial injustice (Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2007). Similar research conducted in New Zealand has suggested that contact with white New Zealanders is associated with a reduction of Maori support for legislation designed to encourage land restitution to Indigenous New Zealanders (Sengupta & Sibley, 2013), whilst surveys conducted in Israel, India and the US have produced variations on this theme (e.g. Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio & Pratto 2009, Study 2; Tausch, Saguy & Singh, 2009).

Experimental work on the ironic effects of contact is currently limited to a handful of studies. However, those few studies provide powerful demonstrations of the potential ‘sedative’ effects on minority political attitudes. Saguy et al. (2009, Study 1) found that contact designed to increase a sense of commonalty with an advantaged group also increased the expectation amongst members of disadvantaged group that they would be fairly treated in a task that involved the intergroup distribution of valued resources (even though, in the

experimental context, this proved not to be the case). Likewise, Saguy and Chernyak-Hai (2013, Study 1) found that positive, commonality-focused contact led lower status participants to view hierarchical power relations as more legitimate relative to participants who experienced either no contact or contact that focused on intergroup differences. As such, they were less ready to attribute potentially negative treatment to outgroup discrimination. A final illustration is provided by Glasford and Calcagno (2012) whose work introduced the idea that contact may shape political relations amongst members of different communities who *share* a history of disadvantage. They found that positive contact with a historically advantaged group ('White Americans') moderated the tendency of common identification to promote political solidarity with between Latin and Black Americans. In a nutshell, Latin American respondents who had more contact with Whites tended to express less willingness to work together with Blacks for a common political cause.

Attempts to explain the 'sedative' effects of contact on political activism are at an early stage of development. Some researchers have emphasized the role of contact in diminishing perceptions of collective injustice amongst the disadvantaged, which has in turn been found to reduce their collective action orientation (Dixon et al., 2010). Other researchers have explored a range of related factors, including the relationship between contact and perceptions of social mobility, systems justification beliefs, readiness to identify strongly with the ingroup, and the dampening down of emotional reactions such as anger and outrage (e.g. Sengupta & Sibley, 2013; Tausch, Saguy & Bryson, 2015; Wright et al., 2009). On a broader level, by fostering positive attitudes towards others and social harmony, contact may sustain paternalistic power relations (Jackman, 1994), establishing bonds of affection and trust that make collective resistance to the status quo more difficult to inspire. For this reason, Maoz (2011) has argued that contact interventions may even play an ideological role in maintaining structural inequalities.

Future directions

In this paper we have highlighted three areas which we believe have important implications for the future of contact research. We now want to highlight how these three ‘critical’ themes might foster productive lines of future research, expanding on some of the reflections raised across our paper.

Negative contact

Work on negative contact effects is at a relatively early stage of development and has been based almost entirely on cross-sectional surveys, with the exception of a number of experimental studies (e.g. Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Paolini et al., 2010; Paolini et al., 2014). This has made it difficult so far to disentangle the independent, interactive and longer term effects of positive and negative forms of contact as they unfold within particular social contexts. Under what conditions does negative contact swamp the benefits of positive contact? Under what conditions does positive contact in the past act as a buffer against negative contact effects in the present? Moreover, do these forms of contact differentially predict social psychological outcomes, including outcomes beyond the standard indices of prejudice reduction)? For example, it is now established that positive contact is often negatively associated with collective action orientation amongst members of historically disadvantaged communities, possibly because it diminishes their sense of social injustice and associated emotions such as frustration and anger (e.g. see Tausch et al., 2015). However, one might hypothesize that negative contact experiences work in the opposite direction; that is, they may lead the disadvantaged to recognise inequality and become more motivated to challenge the status quo. Specifically, sustained negative experiences of contact with dominant group members may increase the likelihood that the disadvantaged will participate in so-called ‘non-normative’ forms of collective action, including violent expressions of resistance, being

driven by negative emotions such as contempt (cf. Tausch et al., 2011). Programmes of experimental and longitudinal research may help to address such questions; for example, by allowing the independent and interactive effects of negative and positive contact across a range of social psychological outcomes to be clarified.

At the same time, the concept of ‘negative contact’ highlights the need for methods that can capture the *relativity* of contact experiences across the often considerable divides of power and status. In this regard, we would argue that future qualitative work is likely to reveal basic differences in how lower and higher status groups make sense of adverse encounters with others, teasing out not only differences in the *intensity* but also differences in the *kinds* of experiences involved. Consider, as an instructive example, Blackwood and colleagues’ (2015) work on Muslim passengers’ everyday encounters with the authorities in British Airports, which has shown how processes of surveillance (and suspicion) may serve to undermine their very identity as British citizens. In this case, as the authors’ analysis of interview accounts starkly reveals, the ‘negativity’ of contact was intimately bound up with wider processes of marginalization and exclusion of Muslims in British society, as well as their related understanding of local practices of ethnic targeting of ‘security’ practices.

Explaining the tenacity of segregation in everyday activity spaces

Hewstone (2015) recently branded segregation as the ‘enemy of contact’. As our brief review of research on micro-ecological relations in everyday activity spaces has demonstrated, it has proved to be a pervasive and persistent enemy, affecting relations in many of the societies in which contact research has flourished. Study after study has shown how the micro-level organization of social interaction in everyday life is marked not by

communication across intergroup lines, but by recurring patterns of boundary construction and distancing that effectively pre-empt the possibility of such communication.

Most recent work on activity space segregation, however, has merely sought to *describe* such routine behavioural patterns, often using observational and mapping methods. The social psychological factors that underpin such behaviour have thus been underspecified. In our view, future research needs to be designed in a way that captures *both* the ordinary behaviours that create systematic patterns of segregation ‘in the wild’ and the cognitive and emotional dynamics underpin these patterns. The work of Al Ramiah et al. (2015) and Dixon and Durrheim (2003) offer different examples of methodological paradigms that might be exploited to achieve this goal.

Intriguingly, of course, such factors are likely to include individuals’ past experiences of different forms of contact with others. Some evidence suggests that positive contact in one context at a given point in time tends to increase the likelihood that individuals will open themselves up to positive contact in other contexts and at other times (e.g. Braddock 1980; Braddock and McPartland, 1989), arguably by decreasing intergroup anxiety and prejudice. Conversely, we would hypothesize that negative contact experiences may work in the opposite direction, creating a negative cycle of fear, enmity, and further avoidance. Again, the relationship between these two forms of contact and the nature of their independent and interactive influence on everyday practices of segregation is an issue for future research.

Another potential line of future research concerns the relationship between patterns of (re)segregation and implicit attitudes towards others. Existing research on the social psychological determinants of (re)segregation has focused on the role of explicit processes, such as self-reported stereotypes about others, ingroup preferences or prejudice. However, in an inventive study, Towles-Schwen and Fazio (2006) found that implicit attitudes (measured

using an unobtrusive priming task) predicted the durability of mixed-race living arrangements over time at an American university. Their research focused on the behaviours of White freshmen who had been randomly allocated room mates who were either White or Black. To simplify a more complex pattern of findings, they found that freshmen who had more negative initial implicit racial attitudes were more likely, over the course of a semester, to dissolve mixed-race living arrangements than freshmen who had more positive initial implicit attitudes (e.g. by asking to relocate to another room). Among other contributions, their work provides a suggestive paradigm for exploring the role of implicit processes in predicting behavioural practices of avoidance and resegregation.

Contact and Social Change revisited

Work on the ‘sedative’ political effects of positive intergroup contact has arguably offered the most searching recent critique of the limits of the contact hypothesis as a framework for promoting social change. However, in our view, the implications of this critique is not that we should abandon the project of trying to get members of historically divided communities to like one another more. Rather, we need to specify more carefully the boundary conditions within which contact interventions ‘work’ (and, indeed, to think more carefully about how we define the term ‘work’ in this context).

For example, within societies marked by longstanding, institutionalised patterns of social inequality, interventions to promote prejudice reduction may ultimately have a limited impact on social change. Indeed, ironically, by creating social harmony between members of institutionally unequal groups they may actually undermine the conditions necessary for social change to occur. Similarly, when relations between groups are fundamentally paternalistic in character (e.g. some forms of gender relations), then the project of getting the parties involved to like one another more is unlikely to be effective. After all, within such

relations, positive emotions and mutually ‘beneficial’ exchanges are *part of the process* through which power operates and are therefore unlikely to be central to the solution (cf. Jackman, 1996).

Alternatively, within societies where social justice has been broadly achieved but where people are recovering from a history of violent conflict, the psychological benefits of contact (e.g. in reducing intergroup threat and promoting positive responses such as trust and forgiveness) may be critical for improving intergroup relations and reducing discrimination (e.g. see Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger & Niens, 2006; Hewstone et al., 2008). Our overarching point is that understanding both the immediate and longer term consequences of intergroup contact requires sensitivity to the ‘stubborn particulars’ (Cherry, 1995) of local social, political and historical conditions. It requires analysis of the affordances and impediments to social change that are embedded within those conditions.

In a similar way - again qualifying recent evidence on the ‘sedative’ effects of contact - future research needs to acknowledge that different forms of contact may exercise different effects on political attitudes and behaviours, only some of which have featured in the literature. Thus, in a promising line of work, some researchers have attempted to specify the conditions under which positive contact does *not* diminish political activism amongst the disadvantaged. Becker et al., (2013), for instance, argue that positive contact only reduces the collective action orientation of disadvantaged group members under particular circumstances. In their experimental work, this effect emerged only when dominant group members either defended the status quo or kept their political opinions private. When those members publically admitted that the status quo was illegitimate, contact did not suppress political activism.

Dixon et al. (2015) offer a different example of how intergroup contact can promote rather than decrease the collective resistance of historically disadvantaged communities to social inequality. They argue that contact research has tended to over-emphasize *hierarchical* contact as a driver of social change, based on the assumption that change involves getting the historically advantaged to hold more positive attitudes towards the historically disadvantaged. Instead, they argue for greater emphasis on the role of (more) *horizontal* contact between members of communities who share a history of disadvantage. Building on an analysis of relations between Indian and Black South Africans in the post-apartheid era, they suggest that this shift in emphasis opens up new ways of thinking about the relationship between contact and social change. Notably, it encourages us to consider how contact may promote recognition of the shared injustices of the past, the formation of political alliances and coalitions of the disadvantaged, an increased sense of collective efficacy that the social order can be transformed and, ultimately, joint action towards that collective goal. In short, work on this form of contact may begin to bridge the gap between contact as an intervention to promote prejudice reduction and contact as an intervention to promote collective action.

Conclusion

The point of our paper has not been to disavow the value of contact-based interventions. To the contrary, our aim has been to expand the horizons of future work, sharpen its practical utility and breadth of application, and refocus attention on the problems of institutional and political change that engaged its proponents in earlier decades and that have recently been brought back to the fore. In our view, emerging critiques of contact research carry three general implications for how the field might be developed. First, they highlight a disconnection between the kinds of ‘contact’ that psychologists have routinely investigated and the kinds of contact that participants experience in everyday life. In many historically divided societies, contact is shaped by the harsh realities of unequal status, negative

encounters, segregation and discrimination. Future research needs to grapple with such realities. Second and related, recent critiques show how the standard focus on structured contact and explicit processes with particular methodological tools of the contact tradition, namely laboratory experiments and questionnaire surveys, have not fully captured the nature, meaning and consequences of contact ‘on the ground’. Again, future research needs to transcend these conventional methodological limits and, in particular, it needs to grapple with contact as an everyday behavioural practice. Third, and perhaps most important, research on the ironic effects of contact on resistance to social inequality suggests that contact researchers must continue to probe the limits of the prejudice reduction model of change on which the entire contact tradition is based.

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